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Satellites see Soviets violating arms accord

By Walter Andrews
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Satellite photos have provided U.S. intelligence with evidence that the Soviets are developing a new, larger, nuclear missile in violation of the spirit if not the letter of arms control agreements, government sources said.

Although the new solid-propellant missile has not been flight-tested, the sources said ground tests of the rocket motors and of a different launch mechanism indicate that the new SSX-26, as the weapon is being

called, will have a significantly greater throw weight than the SSX-24 being flight tested.

Throw weight is the measure of a missile's ability to hurl nuclear warheads from one continent to another. Along with accuracy, it is considered a main indicator of an ICBM's effectiveness.

House Speaker Thomas "Tip" O'Neill and other opponents of the MX missile will attempt later this week to reverse last Wednesday's 229-to-199 vote that approved 15 more MXs if the Soviets stay away from nuclear arms negotiations.

The Soviets have claimed the SSX-24, which is expected to become operational this year, as the new ICBM allowed each side under the 1979 SALT II accord. Both nations say they are honoring the accord although it was never ratified by the U.S. Senate.

Recent reports on the new Soviet solid-propellant missile left open the possibility that the SSX-26, because it has not yet been flight-tested, was only a modification of the SSX-24. Flight testing is considered a critical indicator.

But officials, who spoke on the condition that they not be identified, said recent satellite photos of the rocket motors being ground-tested at the Pavlograd solid-propellant center provide strong evidence that the SSX-26 will be longer and have a wider diameter than the SSX-24.

In addition, the sources said launch assist device (LAD) testing at the facility in the central U.S.S.R. has shown the missile will be cold-launched — it will pop up from its underground silo before rocket ignition.

The significance of cold launching is that a much larger missile can be placed in a silo because room does not have to be allowed for the venting of the rocket's exhaust, the sources said.

Another difference provided by satellite photos, the sources said, is the existence of a new vehicle, called the transporter erector-launcher, for loading the missile into its silo. The new vehicle is larger than the one used for the SSX-24.

Also, the sources said photos have shown launch silos slightly larger than those used by the SSX-24 at the Plesetsk flight test range, and which are different than the silos used by Soviet liquid-fueled missiles.

In sum, the satellite intelligence provides strong evidence that the Soviets are developing a new missile and are violating at least the spirit of the Salt II agreement, the sources said.

Estimates are that the SSX-26 will not be flight-tested until late 1986, although it is possible they could be made sometime in 1985, the officials said.

The Salt II agreement expires in December 1985, and the SSX-26 technically would not be in violation unless flight-tested before then, the sources said. But the development of the missile, as evidenced by the satellite photos, shows at least a violation of the spirit of the arms agreement.

The sources estimated that the new missile would have a throw

weight of about 12,500 pounds, approximately a third larger than the 9,600 pounds attributed to the U.S. MX and the Soviet SSX-24 missiles.

It is still smaller than the 15,000-pound throw weight of the Soviet's giant SS-18 liquid-fueled missile, according to the sources. A solid-propellant missile has a military advantage in that it can be launched quicker and easier than a liquid-fueled weapon.

The MX and the SSX-24 each has demonstrated the ability in tests to carry 10 nuclear warheads. The warheads would be independently targeted by a so-called "bus," which launches each at the precise moment needed to hit its target.

The SS-18 has demonstrated a capability to carry into orbit and target as many as 14 warheads. Because of its size, it is believed the SSX-26 will be able to carry somewhere between 10 and 14 warheads, the sources said.